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Spies bearing gifts

Those who want to repeat history would like others to forget it. This axiom has been illustrated by the Central Intelligence Agency's campaign to justify a return to the college campuses of America.

The espionage professionals would like students and teachers to forget how the CIA, in the '50s and '60s, used covert funding to penetrate and manipulate the National Students Association and how it commissioned books and articles to be used for propaganda and disinformation around the world.

The CIA has its bureaucratic reasons for wanting to return to the campuses. Deputy Director Robert Gates told The New York Times that a review of "intelligence failures" convinced the CIA that its analysts were too parochial, often suffering from a "US government perspective" that distorted reality. "There were scholars out there saying the shah was in trouble, and somehow that never got incorporated into any official assessment."

To solve the problem, the agency has been signing professors to contracts for books and consulting services, and has been sponsoring 75 conferences a year since 1982. "What we are after are people who will challenge us constructively, offer us a different perspective," said Gates, arguing that the "unorthodox" perspectives of independent scholars are needed "to help us do our job."

Gates may be right, but he is disingenuous when he says that bureaucracies such as the CIA "have difficulty promoting imagination

and creativity." Does this mean that American universities should be renting the services of teachers and scholars to the CIA?

If all it wants from cooperative academics is their "imagination and creativity," the CIA can obtain these products of free inquiry the same way that scholars and students do - by reading the professors' books and articles and by attending conferences and symposiums. The covert fees and fellowships now seeping into academia from the CIA can buy scholastic priorities.

Once a scholar signs a contract to write a book for the CIA, he ceases to be an autonomous thinker and becomes a servant, not merely of the state, but of that organ of the state most hostile to intellectual freedom. The craft of intelligence is rooted in secrecy and deception. Education depends upon openness and clarity.

In an open society, scholars enjoy the privilege of pursuing truth for its own sake. Because their counterparts in Haiti, Romania and Iran have only the choice of serving the state or keeping silent, unfettered researchers have an obligation to preserve their critical distance from state power.

Each university should decide for itself whether to open the portals of education to the CIA. While making that decision, however, the community of scholars ought to recall what happened to the Trojans once they allowed a gift from their enemies to penetrate the walls of their city.

*But this will probably be your first question at Harvard - you should challenge that the root of knowledge intelligence is secrecy and deception - & the gift we are looking for is the gift of knowledge that academics can offer its country so that is can stay free - a deep price of freedom - & not the gift of bullsh*t which the state offers*